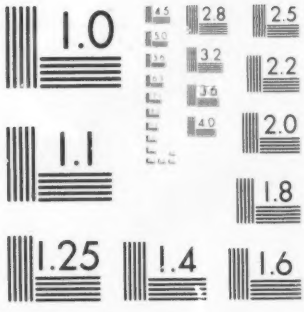

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ABSTRACT

In response to a 34-item questionnaire, 112 members of the United States House of Representatives gave their opinions of network television coverage of House activities and members. It was found that respondents believed that their access to network television is poor when compared to the President and to the Senate, although their actions are as newsworthy as other branches; although the data on individual media access indicated no significant differences in the network coverage of Democrats and Republicans, Republican respondents perceived a political bias against them in network news while the Democrats did not; and respondents on the whole were dissatisfied with network television coverage of the House, believing it to be both inadequate and negative. In addition, the results showed the respondents belief that institutional changes within the House would substantially improve media coverage was eroding. (TJ)

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Congressional Perceptions of Network Television Coverage of the United States House of Representatives

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At the beginning of the 93rd Congress after the re-election of President Nixon in 1972, Congress found itself increasingly incapable of asserting itself as a co-equal branch of the government against executive incursions on its constitutionally-ordained powers. It also discovered that its ability to communicate with the American people and to inspire confidence in its policies was also waning.[1] As the late Senator Lee Metcalf of Montana said, "A Congress unable to project its voice much beyond the banks of the Potomac--to be heard and understood only dimly outside Washington, D.C.--can be neither representative nor responsive."[2]

Faced with the reality of the unchecked communications power of the President and having no real power to counter it, the Joint Committee on Congressional Operations launched a major study of Congress and mass communications. After months of hearings and reports, the Committee concluded that televising House floor proceedings was the most "practical, immediate, and direct" way to improve media coverage of Congress.[3] Today, nearly five years after the Joint Committee's recommendation and more than thirty years after the first broadcasting resolution was introduced, the House of Representatives has opened its chambers to the cameras. Coverage was released to broadcasters and the public in March, 1979.

While cable television could offer the most hopeful long-range opportunities for House broadcasting the commercial television networks still constitute the most viable means of broadcasting congressional coverage. While numerous options are available for House members to communicate with their own constituents, network television has been among the least accessible

media to members of the House. This network disenfranchisement is significant because television news is a potent means for political groups to speak to the nation as a whole. The fact that only a handful of House members are recognized as "newsworthy" by the networks invites substantial dissatisfaction and frustration by the House members.

The gap between network exposure of congressmen and other governmental officials is most striking in the case of the President and, to a lesser extent, the Senate.[4] Research indicaces that the President and Senate consistently receive a higher priority in terms of news judgment than the House of Representatives.[5] One study found that most stories about the House on network news portray it negatively.[6]

This paper examines the attitudes of congressmen toward network congressional coverage, exploring reasons for dissatisfaction, and alternatives for improving it. It also attempts to measure congressional attitudes on the impact of opening the House to broadcasting. The following research questions form the foundation for the paper:

1. Do members of the House believe they are slighted in terms of exposure when compared to other divisions of the government?

2. Do congressmen believe a political bias against one or both major political parties exists in network television news?

3. Is there a profound dissatisfaction among congressmen over network television coverage of the House? Does this dissatisfaction differ according to party, seniority, geographic region or media exposure of members?

4. Do congressmen believe institutional change within the networks or the House will increase network coverage of the House or do they believe that the amount of coverage is relatively static and will not be affected by policy changes?

Methodology

A thirty-four item questionnaire was sent to members of the U.S. House of Representatives on December 4, 1978. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter from the Speaker's Office explaining the purpose of the research and urging cooperation. One hundred twelve responses were received which were representative of the party, seniority, and demographic make-up of the House. Each questionnaire contained twenty attitudinal statements about network television congressional coverage employing a five-point Likert-type scale.

The prototype for the construction of the attitudinal statements was a questionnaire sent to congressmen in 1976 by the Congressional Communication Study Team at American University which posed twenty-eight questions about media coverage of Congress.[7] None pertained exclusively to the television networks. One question from the American University study was included in the questionnaire as a means of comparing results directly with the previous research. Three other derivatives were tailored to resolve ambiguities and apply them exclusively to network television news.

Findings

The American University study found that House members were very much aware of the disparity between House coverage and coverage of other governmental entities. Only three percent of the respondents disagreed with the statement, "National media largely ignore the House in favor of the Senate and the President."[8] When the question was narrowed in the present study to include the President only and limited to network television news, the results were substantially the same--80 percent agreement with the statement compared to

79 percent agreement in the American study (Table I).

In response to the statement, "If House and Senate committees hold hearings on the same day on the same subject, the House committee is more likely to be covered by the television networks," only one respondent agreed. This result reinforces the stereotype that congressmen are "work horses" and Senators "show horses." Or, as Speaker Rayburn is said to have once remarked, "You can tell a House member who has just been elected to the Senate. He starts to puff up as he crosses the rotunda."

This data would indicate that House members must start each day at a disadvantage in terms of network television exposure. The fact that they are aware of this organizational constraint could result in a higher level of dissatisfaction with their plight as low priority news sources. There is some evidence to suggest that the House has developed an "inferiority complex" over its lack of network media clout. When members were asked how they thought network television correspondents valued an assignment to the House of Representatives, the majority said it was average or below average despite the fact that the founding fathers designed the House of Representatives as a dichotomal member of a co-equal branch of the government (Table II). We could infer from this attitude that congressmen, after years of frustration, are now resigned that the House has an inherent low priority institutional status in the network television newsprocessing system.

There is also a feeling among House members that the network gatekeeping system works against them. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents believed less than 25 percent of congressional stories submitted by network House correspondents were ever broadcast on the evening news. Ninety-one percent believed the networks used less than half of the reports submitted about the House. Only one person thought that more than 75 percent of the House reports were

Table I

Congressional Responses to Attitudinal Statements

(All numbers are in percentages.)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Media coverage of Congress is seriously inadequate. (N=111)	15	49	8	27	1
2. The television networks largely ignore the House in favor of the President. (N=112)	21	59	11	8	1
3. Republicans and Democrats in the House have an equal chance of gaining television exposure on the network evening news. (N=112)	3	43	13	30	12
4. The House doesn't receive more television coverage by the networks because its actions aren't as newsworthy as those of other departments of the government. (N=112)	2	2	6	63	28
5. If House and Senate committees hold hearings on the same day on the same subject, the House committee is more likely to be covered by the television networks. (N=112)	0	1	13	64	22
6. The House would get substantially more coverage on network television news if its committees and floor proceedings were more accessible to the networks. (N=112)	4	39	18	38	2
7. Fears have been exaggerated that the television networks will distort coverage of House floor proceedings if they are allowed to control the cameras. (N=112)	12	38	15	27	9

7

8

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
8. Regardless of what congressmen do to increase it, the amount of network television evening news coverage of the House will remain the same. (N=112)	0	38	17	44	1
9. The networks don't seem to understand the legislative process. (N=112)	13	39	24	23	1

(Some totals may not equal 100 percent due to rounding error.)

Table II

Congressional Perceptions of the

Network Gatekeeping System

1. What percentage of stories submitted by network television correspondents covering the House do you think are broadcast on the evening news? (N=102)

Under 25 percent	59%
Under 50 percent	32%
Under 75 percent	8%
More than 75 percent	1%

2. How do you think Washington network television correspondents value an assignment to the House of Representatives? (N=103)

One of the best assignments	8%
An above-average assignment	40%
An average assignment	33%
A below-average assignment	16%
One of the worst assignments	4%

(Some totals may not equal 100 percent due to rounding error.)

broadcast on the evening news (Table II). This data implies rather strongly that members believe actions by network gatekeepers in New York discriminate against them in an institutional way.

While House members believe their network television news access is severely limited, when compared to the Senate and the President, no research indicates whether or not members believe this chronic lack of coverage is justified. Perhaps members believe they do not deserve as much coverage as other branches and, thus, don't receive it. The following question is aimed at resolving this potential ambiguity:

> The House doesn't receive more television coverage by the networks because its actions aren't as newsworthy as those of other departments of the government.

Not only did 90 percent of the respondents disagree with this statement, but 28 percent strongly disagreed, the highest percentage among all attitudinal questions. Four percent agreed while only 6 percent remained neutral (Table I, question four). This response, which was stronger than anticipated, demonstrated that House members not only believe that network organizational bias exists in favor of the President and the Senate, but that they believe the bias is totally without justification.

Although this paper is primarily concerned with institutional behavior, the network access of individual congressmen is also important. Most studies involving reporters and public officials have equated press contacts with access. It is generally presumed that if a newspaper reporter interviews a public official, at least part of that interview will be printed in some form. In network television news, however, where competition for time on the evening news is particularly keen, being interviewed is no guarantee, and in some cases now even a reliable indicator of network news exposure. Questions

asking members how many times they were interviewed by the networks and how many times those interviews were broadcast reflected this reality. While only 21 percent of the respondents said they had never been interviewed during the two years of the 95th Congress, nearly twice as many (41 percent) said they had never appeared on network news during the past two years. Likewise, of those who had relatively high media contact (three or more network interviews) only one-fourth of them said their interviews had been broadcast three or more times (Table III).

The presence of a gap between news contact and news access could affect all attempts on the part of the House to increase network coverage. Even if cameras are allowed to cover all House proceedings, there is no guarantee that they will be either covered or broadcast. Therefore, the House should not expect a stimulus-response type of reaction from the networks concerning the granting of access. While it would seem advantageous to allow cameras into the House chamber for a variety of reasons, this access does not in any way portend increased network exposure. Or as Representative Jack Brooks of Texas perceptively stated, "Making the news and getting coverage on it are not always related."[9] Despite this reality, at least one network President told the Joint Committee on Congressional Operations that opening the House to broadcasting would substantially increase the amount of congressional coverage on the network evening news.[10]

The fact that 41 percent of the respondents never achieved access to the network evening news during a two year period indicates that while the House in theory may speak with 435 voices, far fewer voices are heard via the nation's most powerful communications medium. A closer examination of the member access data indicates that some members appear to have a much better chance than others of gaining network exposure.

Table III

Network Television Exposure of Members of Congress

1. How many times were you interviewed by network television congressional correspondents during the 95th Congress? (N=110)

Never	Once	Twice	3-6 Times
21	13	15	28

7-10 Times	11-14 Times	15-20 Times	More than 20 Times
7	6	3	7

2. How many times were your interviews or speeches broadcast on the network television evening news during the 95th Congress? (N=108)

Never	Once	Twice	3-6 Times
41	16	18	19

7-10 Times	11-14 Times	15-20 Times	More than 20 Times
3	0	3	2

(All numbers are in percentages.)
(Some totals may not equal 100 percent due to rounding error.)

Members who were personally acquainted with network congressional correspondents were twice as likely to have been interviewed three or more times than those who said they did not know a correspondent. Likewise, 84 percent of those who were interviewed less than three times said they were not personally acquainted with a correspondent (p .000). As might be expected, seniority was also a factor in media exposure. Members who had served in the House five or more years had a much better chance of being interviewed at least three times by the networks (Table IV).

When one examines the number of times interviews were actually broadcast, however, the seniority advantage virtually disappears. The difference between high and low seniority members' network access was fairly small (57 to 43 percent) and not statistically significant. This would indicate that certain veteran members, as a result of their powerful positions, command network attention to a certain extent, but not access to the network television news, which seems to be beyond their control. Those members who are personally acquainted with network correspondents, however, regardless of seniority seem to be able to sustain access as well as attention. Seventy-six percent of those who said they knew a correspondent, reported being covered on the network evening news during the 95th Congress ($p<.02$). This result can be misleading, however, as acquaintance with correspondents could be the result of high media exposure, not vice versa.

An interesting finding from the data is the lack of difference between network exposure of Democrats and Republicans. The number of times interviewed and the number of times interviews were broadcast remained roughly the same for both parties. There was no evidence to suggest that the networks were favoring one party over another in terms of interviews or access to the evening

Table IV

Number of Times Congressmen Interviewed and

Number of Times Interviews Broadcast by

Number of Years Service in House

(N=110)

Number of Times Interviewed	1-4 Years	5 or More Years
Two or Less Times	60%	38%
Three or More Times	40%	62%

$x^2 = 4.331$ with 1 df, $p < .04$

(N=108)

Number of Times Interviews Broadcast	1-4 Years	5 or More Years
Never	45%	37%
Once or More	55%	63%

$x^2 = .456$ with 1 df, $p < .50$

news. This finding contrasts sharply with the political bias perceived by Republican members of the House. Eighty-seven percent of Republicans disagreed with the statement, "Republicans and Democrats in the House have an equal chance of gaining television exposure on the network evening news." This compared with only 30 percent of the Democrats who disagreed; a majority of Democrats thought both parties had an equal exposure opportunity (Table V). While the Republicans believe they are discriminated against, their own estimates of their individual media exposure contradict these perceptions.

Assessment of Network Coverage

Not only do House members believe that their network television news access is limited, but they also dislike the quality of the reporting. Repeatedly during the Joint Committee on Congressional Operations' hearings, members complained of superficial congressional coverage which avoided complex issues in favor of easily explained events and personalities. House members, in particular, testified that the networks didn't attempt to cover the House as an institution by following a bill through the entire range of legislative consideration. The feelings of Illinois Representative John Anderson were echoed by several members:

> What segments of televised hearings (do) the networks choose to air on their nightly newscasts? I think you will agree that more often than not these consist of either short, sensational statements or heated exchanges. This is good television. But does it really convey to the public what the legislative process or the constitutional role of Congress is all about? [11]

The 1976 American University study of congressional media attitudes found that 78 percent of the respondents agreed that "Media coverage of Congress is seriously inadequate." Sixty-four percent of those responding to the current study agreed with this statement, reflecting a majority feeling of dissatisfaction (Table I, question 1).

Table V

Republicans and Democrats Have Equal

Exposure Chance by Party Affiliation

(N=109)

	Democrat	Republican
Disagree	30%	87%
Neutral	15%	4%
Agree	55%	9%

$x^2 = 23.999$ with 2 df, $p<.000$

One of the allegations made during the Joint Committee hearings was that the networks couldn't cover Congress properly because they didn't seem to understand the legislative process. Despite the aspersions this statement casts upon the ability of network news personnel, a surprising 42 percent of the respondents agreed with it (Table I, question 9).

Alternatives for Institutional Change

Throughout the entire Congress and mass communications debate of the 1970's, House members assumed that some type of overt change within the House of Representatives would mitigate and perhaps even solve the problem of congressional media access and coverage. While congressmen frequently fault the networks for their lack of House coverage, most proposals for change presented to the Joint Committee on Congressional Operations in 1974 cited failings on the part of the House as the chief cause of the coverage gap. This feeling of congressional inadequacy was abetted by media witnesses who pointed to congressional procedures and lack of media sophistication among House members as chief obstacles to network coverage.

When the American University study provided members with eight attitudinal statements laying blame for media problems with the Congress, respondents agreed with all of them. Furthermore, members agreed with a series of statements that proposed House institutional change as a means of improving coverage.

The American study findings supported the evidence presented during the 1974 Joint Committee hearings which indicated that opening the House floor and committees to television, bolstering the House's institutional communications power and accommodating newsmen's needs would all provide major incentives for expanded network coverage.

While the House could be expected to shoulder a substantial portion of the blame for the paucity of network coverage in years past, the opening of congressional proceedings in recent years seems to negate the significance of House change. A major purpose of this study was to determine whether members of the 95th Congress believe, as previous research indicates, that institutional change within the House will provide a significant increase in network coverage of the House of Representatives.

The first statement to be analyzed postulated that network news congressional coverage would increase substantially if House committee and floor proceedings were more accessible. Forty-three percent agreed, 39 percent disagreed, while 18 percent remained neutral. These results did not reflect a strong feeling among House members that giving the networks access would substantially increase news coverage. Furthermore, the ambivalence of House members did not significantly differ across demographic, seniority, party or media access lines. These results contrast with the Joint Committee's recommendation to televise the House as "the most practical, immediate, and direct way to enhance public understanding of congressional activities." Apparently, a sizeable number of respondents from the 95th Congress did not perceive network access to House proceedings as the same panacea envisioned by the Joint Committee.

Journalists are fond of chastizing congressmen for their lack of effectiveness in communicating, implying that this is the reason for the lack of coverage. While few would argue that congressmen could do a better job of communicating with the broadcasting and print media, members do not view this kind of improvement as a means of gaining a substantial increase in network exposure.

A second statement on institutional change in the current study addressed the coverage potential for individual members:

> If House members would use the opportunities now available to them for media exposure, the number of network television news stories about the House would increase substantially.

Twenty-seven percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, 51 percent disagreed, while 23 percent remained neutral. In this case, far more strongly than in the previous statement, respondents reflected their lack of confidence in House change as a means of increasing network coverage. The disagreement with the "opportunities use" statement was particularly pronounced among members who were not personally acquainted with a network correspondent. In fact, there was a negative correlation ($r=-.30$, $p<.004$) between the attitudes on using available opportunities and acquaintance with correspondents.

The previous two statements concerning institutional change within the House give us reason to believe that members blame network organizational constraints rather than the lack of House initiative for the current low level of congressional coverage. Even though congressmen do not see House oriented change as a panacea for expanded coverage, we do not know if they see this kind of change as hopeless either. Therefore, in order to measure congressional attitudes on this subject, the following statement was included in the primary instrument:

> Regardless of what congressmen do to increase it, the amount of network television evening news coverage will remain the same.

This statement offers no easy alternative. To agree with it denotes a certain amount of fatalism on the part of House members. It is a statement with which congressmen might find it difficult to agree even if they thought it was true. It implies that the network media environment is beyond congressional manipulation. Despite the gravity of this question, 38 percent of

the respondents agreed with it. Forty-five percent disagreed, while 17 percent remained neutral. This is indeed a striking result when one considers that the House of Representatives has recently spent millions of dollars and launched several investigations based on the belief that what they were doing would make a substantial difference in the level of network congressional coverage. Yet, less than a majority of respondents believed these efforts will make any difference at all. As with the previous two statements, no significant differences were registered along sub-group or demographic lines; the sentiment crossed all boundaries.

Results from the three "House change" statements taken cumulatively show no strong belief by congressmen that their efforts toward increasing network exposure will have a great impact. In fact, more than a third of the respondents doubted that anything the House did would make a difference. This lack of control perceived by congressmen contrasts with numerous congressional hearings, statements and legislation based upon the premise that the House can to a large extent influence the amount of network television exposure it receives.

While most House institutional change recently has been associated with giving greater access to the broadcasting media, there have also been limits placed on that access. For example, the House decided to set up its own broadcasting system at considerable cost rather than let the networks control the coverage. It took this action because of fears that the networks, if allowed total freedom, might catch members napping, distort coverage, edit unfairly or in some other way make the House and its members look bad. When the Select Committee on Congressional Operations surveyed members concerning control of the cameras, they found more support for an in-house system than

for one run by the networks. The House vote in May, 1978, to vest control in the hands of the House validated those results. Despite this conventional wisdom, 48 percent of the respondents to the current study agreed that "Fears have been exaggerated that the television networks will distort coverage of House floor proceedings if they are allowed to control the cameras." Thirty-six percent disagreed, while sixteen percent remained neutral. While these results are in no way conclusive, they do refute the anecdotal evidence expressed during the past five years and could portend a softening of the House hard-line against network-controlled coverage. This issue deserves further investigation when an evaluation of the new broadcasting system is made at the end of the 95th Congress.

Not only is it important to examine members' opinions on House institutional change but network change as well. One question in the current study asked members if they believed a particular change within the network would improve congressional coverage:

> Network television news coverage of the House of Representatives would be better if the networks spent more air time on in-depth analysis of complicated issues.

Eighty-four percent agreed, 11 percent disagreed, and 5 percent remained neutral. Obviously, this question evoked a strong positive response from House members surveyed. The importance of this question lies in its contrast to some of the questions on House change. In those three questions respondents reflected a more or less hopeless feeling about the House's prospect for influencing network coverage. Yet, in this question, one finds members optimistic that a change in the network system would make a significant difference.

These results imply that the House in its study of Congress and Mass Communications during the seventies was too introspective and defensive, concentrating so much on its own shortcomings that it overlooked a vital element--that organizational constraints within network news discriminate consistently against House coverage regardless of what congressmen do to change it.

Summary

Do members of the House believe they are slighted in terms of exposure when compared to other divisions of the government?

There can be little doubt that congressmen believe their access to network television is poor when compared to the President and the Senate. They strongly believe, however, that their actions are as newsworthy as other branches and that their lack of access is without justification. These perceptions of organizational bias cross all demographic and party lines.

Do congressmen believe a political bias against one or both major political parties exists in network television news?

An overwhelming majority of Republican respondents perceived a political bias in network news while the Democrats did not. The data on individual media access, however, indicated no significant differences between Democrats and Republicans. Therefore, while the Republicans feel quite strongly that the networks discriminate against them, this assumption appears to have no factual grounding.

Is there a profound dissatisfaction among congressmen over network television coverage of the House? Does this dissatisfaction differ according to party, seniority, geographic region or media exposure of members?

Congressmen seem to be on the whole quite dissatisfied with network television coverage of the House. They believe it to be both inadequate and

negativistic. Furthermore, they seem to have little confidence in the networks' ability to understand fully the complicated intricacies of the legislative process. The congressional dissatisfaction with network coverage is not limited to any particular demographic group in the House.

Do congressmen believe institutional change within the networks or the House will increase network coverage of the House or do they believe that the amount of coverage is relatively static and will not be affected by policy changes?

Even though the concensus in Congress during the past few years has been that institutional change within the House would substantially improve media coverage of the House, this belief seems to be eroding. The majority of respondents in this study expressed no great optimism that either increasing the networks' access to congressional proceedings or improving House members' communication skills would make any great difference in the level of network television exposure. In fact, a sizeable number of congressmen believed that network congressional coverage will remain the same regardless of what the House does to try to improve it.

When asked to volunteer their own opinions about how network television coverage of the House could be increased, a surprisingly large number (though still a minority) believed that changes within the networks such as more in-depth reporting of issues and a more sophisticated approach to House reporting were key factors. Compared to data collected earlier in the 1970's by the Congress and academic groups, there appears to be a stronger emphasis on viewing network organizational constraints rather than House constraints as major inhibitors of network House coverage.

Conclusion

While congressmen are dissatisfied with the amount of network television coverage they now receive, they appear to view House institutional change as less of a panacea for improving coverage than previous research indicates. If, in fact, offering the networks more access will not change coverage patterns as congressmen believe, future efforts to improve coverage should concentrate more on organizational constraints within the network television newsprocessing system than access constraints within the House of Representatives. A content analysis of network news during the 95th and 96th Congresses would reveal whether a major institutional change such as broadcasting House proceedings will significantly affect coverage levels.

Footnotes

[1]John Stuart, Congress and Mass Communication: An Institutional Perspective. Library of Congress, 1974.

[2]U.S. Congress. Joint Committee on Congressional Operations. Broadcasting House and Senate Proceedings. Committee Report No. 93-1458, 93rd Congress, 2nd Sess., 1974, p. 1.

[3]Ibid.

[4]N.N. Minow, J.B. Martin, and L.M. Mitchell, Presidential Television. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

[5]Edward Epstein, News from Nowhere. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.

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[7]Robert O. Blanchard, "Congressional Opinion Survey." Washington, D.C.: American University News Service, 1976.

[8]Ibid.

[9]U.S. Congress. Joint Committee on Congressional Operations. A Clear Message to the People. Committee Report No. 94-539. 94th Congress, 1st Sess., 1975.

[10]Ibid.

[11]U.S. Congress. Joint Committee on Congressional Operations. Hearings on Congress and Mass Communications, 93rd Congress, 2nd Sess., 1974.